Popular Song Afterlives: Oral Transmission and Mundane Creativity in Street Performances of Chinese Pop Classics

Abstract

Amateur live performances on the city streets of Wuhan give afterlives to songs of Chinese pop's canon; they are sites for this repertory to be adapted and assimilated into musical worlds beyond those of the artists and industries responsible for its original production and dissemination. Singers here learn the songs by following commercial recordings, a process I understand with reference to oral transmission as it enables and constrains creativity in ways reflective of the social and technological circumstances of performers' lives. Recordings feed into the spread of change among Wuhan's amateur singers, with certain limitations and new possibilities also resulting from the technologies and skills available on the streets. Looking at popular song afterlives exposes mundane layers of creativity, and it comments more broadly on prosaic drivers of new meaning in current popular music practices.

Keywords

Chinese pop, street music, oral transmission, Wuhan

Introduction

Mainstream Mandarin-dialect popular songs dominate the musical sounds of public space in the city of Wuhan, a provincial capital in central China. As in urban areas all over the country, the tones of disco hits and ballads drift into the streets from speakers on the thresholds of shops and from stalls, and groups of residents dance in city squares to similar tracks for daily exercise. Characteristic of the sounds of this city in particular, though, are the amateur live performances held each afternoon and evening in

various public locations. Small city squares, patches of green space, and derelict corners host handfuls of mainly female solo singers taking turns to present well-known songs from the 1980s onwards. They entertain audiences predominantly made up of older men, commanding a substantial income of cash tips from those that choose to give. The offerings come in recognition of the performances, but also indirectly in exchange for the singers' company during the shows and when they socialize individually and in groups away from the event settings.

The performances give afterlives to songs of Chinese pop's canon; they are sites for this repertory to be adapted and assimilated into musical worlds beyond those of the artists and industries responsible for its original production and dissemination. This is not to imply that the *recordings* of the famous songs die–the canon certainly continues to circulate in this form too. Rather, by evoking the idea of afterlives, I am commenting on phases of *creative agency*; afterlives are about a second wave of impetuses that take over to animate the material with new layers of meaning in different contexts. Understanding relationships between distinct and largely separate phases of creativity is important not least because they are found in numerous other contemporary phenomena beyond street music, including cover versions and bands (Plasketes 2005; Solis 2010), television singing competitions (Fung 2013; Huang 2014), and karaoke (Lum 1996; Lu 2013), as well as in DJing (Tjora 2009), sampling (Chang 2009; Morey and McIntyre 2014; Maalsen 2019), mashups (Maloy 2010), and even posthumous recording collaborations (Stanyek and Piekut 2010).

These contexts demand particular attention in relation to wider understandings of "distributed creativity," a phrase raising various questions about what it means to create and to collaborate (Clarke and Doffman 2017). The version of creativity I evoke here is an inclusive one, preoccupied less with novelty than with the modest, prosaic, and often unintended singularities of any given performance–this 'mundane creativity' is central to the everyday and unpolished amateur circumstances surrounding street performances in Wuhan. As for ideas of collaboration, the afterlife lens grows out of popular

music work interested in genres with global reach; different localities are reflected and produced, for instance, through hip-hop in Turkey (Solomon 2005), China (Fung 2008), and Iran (Goli 2018), as people in each location engage in different ways with the genre's US origins or global threads. But what is the fate of individual songs within these wider dynamics? The term "hypertextuality" describes instances of one text imitating or transforming an earlier one (Lacasse 2000), and when applied to popular music, it is well suited to understanding new recordings made of existing songs (Solis 2010: 306). Everyday local music-making, though, seems to have more in common with 'traditional' music contexts, where songs might be thought of as shared creations rather than as fixed in texts (Bohlman 1988). At the same time, Wuhan's street music also sees musicians working directly with famous recordings, a practice not immediately reconcilable with an ethos of collective creativity. The experience here, then, seems to fall between two stools, and it speaks to different notions of musical meaning. The first takes musical works or texts as paramount, imagined as entities with autonomy from the specifics of performance occasions. The other sees music not primarily in things or products, but in the activities around creating and performing (Small 1998: 2-7).

While various strands of music scholarship have thoroughly problematized the hegemony of the former mode (Goehr 1992; Small 1998; Hamilton 2000; Middleton 2000; Clarke and Doffman 2017), that is not to say that the notions of work and text are expunged from realities felt in real-life engagements in popular music (Horn 2000: 15; Tagg 2000). Debates around negotiating copyright and plagiarism (Bennett 2017; Street and Phillips 2017) attest to this perhaps most vividly in the wider pop context. On Wuhan's streets, too, the idea of famous songs as autonomous entities clearly has currency, as revealed in my discussions below about musicians learning from and replicating aspects of famous recordings. Another clue is in how genre is talked about around the shows. To introduce songs, singers and emcees routinely rely on subcategory labels such as *liuxing* (popular, famous), *yaogun* (rock), and *tongsu* (popular, mass appeal, unserious), the latter intrinsically linked to particular circumstances of state

involvement in the pop industry in the 1980s (Jones 1991). That the term is still in use on the streets implies that *tongsu*-ness is taken to inhere within enduring works or texts, apparently not understood so much as a feature negotiated in performance in relation to the (quite different) political circumstances prevailing three decades later.

The idea of afterlives speaks simultaneously to this reality and also to one in which the unique performance occasion matters; it conceptualizes the latter as a phase of creativity in which something new is layered upon existing material (Solis 2010: 297). A notable feature here is that the two phases are clearly detached in time and through the highly asymmetrical contributions different agents make. Wuhan's street singers ostensibly only tweak the material laid down years before by the original writers, artists, and producers, but this is not to say that the mundane creativity they bring is any less meaningful. Furthermore, what is added in the new layers is not particularly easy to characterize; understanding the relation between material and practice here requires, I argue, examination of three mechanisms functioning implicitly and in the background. The first mechanism involves the role of audio recordings as the primary medium for encountering and learning the music (they are often used directly in performance too). This sets up a point of reference running across all three mechanisms, one not often associated with industrialized popular music production and dissemination: oral transmission. The second mechanism involves dynamics in the spread of mundane creativity among Wuhan's amateur singers, and this gives a better sense of the afterlife's 'vertical' depth, the layering of meaning emerging through ongoing exchange between people in new contexts. The third mechanism I highlight is constraints and possibilities linked to technologies and skills available on the streets, again foregrounding the prosaic in understandings of meaning in popular music more often preoccupied with the heightened or the ideological. These three mechanisms go some way to characterizing the popular song afterlives here, and thus illuminating street performance as an important context for pop's integration into everyday life.

The streets of Wuhan

During a total of four months across the spring and autumn of 2014, I discovered around a dozen of these street performances in the central districts of Wuhan, a city of around ten million people. Each featured between five and fifteen singers, most of whom earned their primary living from performing at either one or two sessions every day (in the afternoons and evenings). My time in Wuhan coincided with a local government initiative to restrict informal vending and semi-organized leisure gatherings in public life (Horlor forthcoming), so I witnessed these performances become more peripheral in the city landscape. Over this period, for instance, one group was moved on by the police from its established performance location on the plaza immediately in front of a major department store at Jianghan Road, one of Wuhan's busiest shopping areas. It then set up in a small paved square in a slightly quieter part of town about a kilometre away, before it was moved on again and forced to find a patch of out-of-the-way green space just off the bank of the Yangtze river–now removed from the hustle and bustle of life in the city centre.[1] This and other shows always took place in freely accessible public territory, so my engagements with them could begin simply through joining the audience crowds, loose circles of between a few handfuls and well over a hundred people, and mainly made up of retired men who told me they lived locally and stopped by regularly to while away a spare hour or two.

With the main preoccupation of singers being to get to know audience members who might offer them tips later, I quickly became acquainted with several at each show. During someone else's turn on the stage, they would circulate among the audience, exchanging snippets of conversation with individuals known to them, and offering non-alcoholic drinks and cigarettes to new acquaintances. I

[1] This official initiative might be read as authorities tightening public space control in 2014. The peripheralization of events is also significant for the shifting challenges and opportunities that performing groups experienced as they adapted to new physical environments. In particular, they had to find ways of exerting themselves in spaces set up to encourage fluidity and transition rather than the sustained interpersonal exchange that supports the financial relationships singers seek to develop (see Horlor forthcoming).

became a regular contact for one or two of the singers at each of the handful of events I went to frequently. During the more than 50 individual performances I attended, I got to know in similarly organic ways the audience members I repeatedly met there, as well as emcees, members of the house bands, and event organizers. I soon learned the basis on which the events were run–set up as petty businesses in which organizers took a cut usually of 20 or 30 percent of the money given by the audience during the singing, these organizers paying band members and emcees flat fees for each session. I joined groups of men singers took to dinner between afternoon and evening shows and extended my unstructured conversations with several performers while sharing meals during the day, and in the online chats that were their central mechanism for keeping in touch with contacts. Singers I met were a mixture of Wuhan natives, those drawn from smaller places near the city, and others from further afield in China. The latter sometimes reported having singing experience in bars or professional troupes, but almost all identified as amateur and untrained.

During a lull in a performance one afternoon in another small green space near Wuhan's Yangtze river bank, I watched an emcee animatedly addressing a crowd of several dozen people. The audience is partly in flux as its core of dedicated spectators is joined and left by passers-by; the emcee's patter welcomes and thanks the audience as a group and some members individually by name, and it ends with a flourish as he calls out "Yang Nu!" the name of the next singer to take to the makeshift stage.[2] There is no response, and a few seconds later the emcee calls again; the audience around me continues to stare impassively at the empty stage, but by now the emcee is struggling to hide his frustration, calling out again: "Yang Nu, *meinü* ('beautiful lady'), please come to the stage!" Eventually Yang does appear, hurriedly squeezing herself through the bodies towards the centre of the circle. She has been busy fraternizing on the fringes of the audience and lost track of her place in the rota as she is

[2] Names have been changed in this article. Perhaps on account of the typically low status of street performing in China (Jeffreys and Wang 2012), many participants I encountered preferred to keep their participation in the shows separate from their wider lives (Horlor 2019a).

called. She pauses to put down her handbag and fumble with a mobile phone, plugging it into the PA system. When it comes to life, it plays her song's backing track, which she has preferred to the support of the live band on this occasion, and she launches into 'Wo de gesheng li' (In my song), a pop ballad that was a nationwide hit for the singer Qu Wanting in 2011. Yang sings along to this recording's backing track as it slowly builds from a gentle beginning with a lone piano towards its climax with a full band and strings. Her rendition here on this afternoon in May 2014 matches my memory of the hit performance quite closely. Indeed, I never witnessed anything but similarly orthodox approaches from singers– earnest attitudes are the norm, and there are no obvious traces of parody or self-conscious subversion in their performances.

It is worth stressing this point to home in a little more on what is at stake on Wuhan's streets in comparison with other afterlife contexts featuring in existing work on Chinese pop (albeit in different terms). Chen Liu calls on the same song to illustrate how prevailing social norms may be challenged through popular music (2014). A Sichuan-dialect version of 'Wo de gesheng li' by the band Yishi is a parody that she says self-consciously identifies with 'low culture' and minority concerns, encourages solidarity among the migrants to the southern city of Guangzhou, and attempts to challenge the perceptions of rural newcomers held by established urban dwellers. On the streets of Wuhan, song afterlives do not self-consciously stamp social ideologies on the material in a similar way, but new meanings play out on the more implicit and prosaic level. Indeed, when a fellow spectator in the park, hearing of my interest in amateur singing, recommends to me watching the 'Zhongguo hao shengyin' (The voice of China) television talent contest, I am reminded of further contrasts. For Anthony Fung, iterations of these shows in the early 2000s are notable as emerging platforms for, and manifestations of, non-mainstream ideological expression (2013). Li Yuchun's victory in 2005's 'Chaoji nüsheng' (Supergirl) associates her with a new wave of "democracy, universal referendum and popular deliberation in China" (ibid.: 81) because the competition is one of the first influenced by home

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audience voting. Again, though, these better-studied afterlife contexts say little about meanings arising on an intimate level, involving people known to each other and relating face-to-face. What can be learned by looking to meanings not read in mass-mediated forms, but in bounded spheres of interaction and interpersonal networks of limited scope?

Karaoke singing is an afterlife context with exactly these characteristics. It is an important reference point for Wuhan's street singing, not least for insights around issues of gender found in existing scholarship on the topic. In the city of Chengdu, Lu Zhenglan surveys participants of Karaoke Television–the form in which groups of friends hire out small private rooms to sing to each other–focusing on how pre-existing readings of gender in the songs are negotiated by real individuals (2013). She notes, for example, a prevalent sense that women should sing songs originally performed by women, and vice versa (ibid.: 141). The significances of song performance in constructing gender identities is amplified even further in other contexts in China, particularly those in which sexual services are extensions of karaoke singing sessions involving businessmen and hostesses. For Tiantian Zheng (2013), feelings of sexual possibility created here depend on how women and men typically perform songs in different ways. She notes, for instance, that singing coquettishly is a tool for expressing submissive femininity and building sexual desirability, while singing coarsely is part of the construction of entrepreneurial masculinity that drives the whole endeavour. 'Ganbei pengyou' (Cheers friend) is a 1997 song originally performed by Tian Zhen, a female singer. The lyrics, however, centre upon the apparently male domains of drinking, comradeship, and wanderlust, and are inextricable from "a rebellious, bold, and active masculinity" at the heart of these sexualized karaoke gatherings (ibid.: 77). In this context, Zheng considers it unthinkable for a woman to sing 'Ganbei pengyou'.

On the streets of Wuhan, on the other hand, I heard female singers perform this very song. 'Ganbei pengyou' is part of a repertory touching on a full range of themes, from the romantic to the patriotic, and from the nostalgic to the playful. But while the gender implications of song choice and

singing style seem far less acute here, gender identity is nonetheless an important factor more widely. Most pivotal are the different roles participants play in the social world around these events. Singer roles are almost exclusively occupied by women, and a large majority of audience members are men. One result is that the women end up reflecting quite closely the submissive behaviour Zheng identifies in the karaoke context, both in their conduct off the stage and on it. As I outline in more depth elsewhere (Horlor 2019b), singers highlight how they rely on the benevolence of gift-giving spectators for the fulfilment of their creative ambitions and for their living. Partly through on-microphone discourses between songs, which play up singers' dependence on audience support, and partly through singers pampering men with their company and small gifts, the latter are cast in provider roles and are encouraged to feel obligated to offer cash. Gender identity, then, is certainly a key feature of the intimate-level meaning surrounding the music-making, even if it is read mainly beyond song choice or vocal style. Again, song afterlives here do not speak particularly strongly to new headline meanings, and they demand tools capable of accessing an implicit level. Subversion and identity contestation are lower on the agenda than daily concerns and prosaic constraints, the targets of my three mechanisms. The first one I address–how the musical material is encountered and learned by singers, and how this enables and constrains mundane creativity–sets up the theme of extended oral transmission uniting the three.

Technologies of oral transmission

Wuhan's street performances have famous Chinese pop songs at their foundations, so the first question to address is how this material is encountered and learned. For some singers, written scores play a limited part in the process ahead of performances on the streets. They showed me printed anthologies of song melodies written in the *jianpu* cipher notation, their work with these scores taking place entirely outside of the performance frame. The keyboard players who lead the live bands, on the other hand,

occasionally refer to their folders of handwritten material, transcribed or copied from various sources, during the actual playing of songs. In my experience, though, they play almost all songs from memory, and the scores are only called upon for unusually unfamiliar pieces. Similarly, I only occasionally saw singers running through lyric sheets backstage and–in very rare instances–consulting or reading from notes mid-song.

The primary source in the learning process for singers is the famous commercial recordings themselves. General exposure through the normal channels of modern life–the mass media, public-space broadcasting, and personal listening habits–account to a large extent for a pre-existing familiarity with many of the famous pop songs that they sing. These are the same influences that mean karaoke participants are able to perform a large repertory of hits with only basic prompting (Ogawa 2001). Recordings as a means of disseminating musical material among performers has been noted in various contexts from the Chinese cultural sphere and elsewhere. Members of street opera troupes in Singapore, for instance, learn their parts through listening to the vocal material recorded for that purpose by one of the performers, or through watching video recordings of shows by Taiwanese troupes (Lee 2009: 66-7). Reliance on media products for music learning is particularly significant in diaspora contexts. Chinese American musicians report growing up without access to professional Chinese music instrumentalists or teachers, the learning of new pieces, instruments, and genres instead relying on absorbing and playing along with radios and cassette recordings (Zheng 2010: 212).

Further afield, Simon Keegan-Phipps notes that participants in English pub folk sessions sometimes make their own basic recordings of the music played during the gatherings, and that the practice can help expand the individual and collective repertory (2013). People take away these recordings to study between sessions and they share them with others; they report using them to become immersed in the material, playing them in the background in everyday life, and sometimes imitating phrases on their instruments and playing along (ibid.: 41). Although commercial CDs are also

used for these purposes to an extent, the ethos in this context is for professional recordings to be looked down upon; it is only really acceptable for beginners to "rely on CDs" (ibid.: 46). The same cannot be said for the American jazz community studied by Paul Berliner. Getting to know canonical commercial recordings intimately is considered a valuable part of the learning process for young jazz musicians, with the emphasis here not so much on expanding the repertory as imitating how famous musicians construct solos. This practice is explicitly intended to provide the basis upon which young musicians subsequently progress to creating their own improvisations (1994: 95-119).

Among musicians on the streets of China, deliberately using a sound recording to learn musical material–by singing along or intentionally absorbing the melody–is not linked to extensive improvisatory or virtuosic practices. Instead, singers described their learning to me as "*nian ge*" ('learning songs'), with the choice of the verb *nian* pointing to the reading or recitation of a text, and less emphasis on interpreting or experimenting with the material (Ganzi, p/c, Wuhan, 16 November 2014). In Wuhan, unlike in most of the examples above, the same tracks are used in both learning and performing songs (at least when singers choose recorded backings over live bands, as they do much of the time at some stages). This joins the two phases of creative agency unusually directly, the consequences of which I outline in the sections below.

First, though, it is important to highlight connections between this way of absorbing and learning material, the social goals taken into the singing, and the performers' backgrounds. Although a few among the dozens of singers I met in Wuhan told me that they had previously enjoyed professional careers in performance troupes and nightclub bands, or had been trained at specialist *yishu xuexiao* ('performing arts colleges'), the vast majority emphasized to me that their singing was a *yeyu* ('amateur') activity, and that their only qualifications were a love for singing. Many told me of becoming street singers to escape lives struggling to make ends meet. Some were single mothers, and others had left hometowns in the regions around Wuhan and beyond to find a better living. I met widespread

acknowledgement from participants of all kinds that the money-giving practices central to this social world are only marginally related to specifically aesthetic concerns. One event organizer called Di placed singing quality into a wider social picture, telling me: "If [a singer] sings too badly I won't invite her to come," noting that mostly they simply "depend upon the voice being good to allow them to forge interpersonal connections (*la renji guanxi*)" (online chat with author, 10 November 2014). Singing on stage, therefore, is usually the starting point for contact between performers and potential benefactors, the continuing flow of cash hinging far more significantly on the interpersonal affinities that are subsequently built up than directly on the specifics of any single performance on the stage.

Considering performers' backgrounds and the integration of the singing into this wider social picture, then, I understand the use of recordings in connection with the notion of oral transmission. The term may most commonly be linked to a 'folk' ethos evident in Western theory since the late eighteenth century (Burke 1981) and is sometimes held up as a common feature of folk and traditional musics across cultures (Keegan-Phipps 2013: 34). A view more useful in this context emphasizes instead the constraints and opportunities afforded to music-making by historical circumstances, "an economic (and sometimes technological) compulsion" (Booth and Kuhn 1990: 417-8). In other words, oral transmission is not first an ideal but a necessity, a description of people simply learning music through the means available to them. Might, then, the notion also help explain popular music practices? In the context of English folk sessions, the use of recordings represents "an active expansion of tradition, convergent with the technological realities of contemporary, everyday life" (Keegan-Phipps 2013: 39), and I think of the situation in Wuhan in similar terms. As distinct from the jazz example, working with recordings here is possible for practitioners without formal or intensive training, and it parallels an ideal oral-transmission model in which learning is incidental to other everyday activity (Booth and Kuhn 1990: 416)–in this case, through contact with pop classics in mundane urban life.

The contested notions of 'folk' and 'tradition' are not really at stake on the streets of Wuhan. But thinking in these terms does highlight that singers' relationship with popular texts is a feature of the technological environment, singers' backgrounds, and the world of social relations. What are the consequences of this for understanding the mundane creativity that arises in local performance, as singers 'collaborate' with famous recordings? I look to the social and cognitive characteristics associated with oral transmission methods, taking forward, in particular, insights about musical memorization.

Re-creating recordings

In typical oral transmission processes, an individual's ability to perceive and memorize features of new material are important factors in limiting what can be taken away from contact with it (Bohlman 1988: 19). When the singer re-creates a song to which they have had only limited exposure, or the renderings they have heard have been inconsistent in their details, they are left not only with a high degree of freedom, but also with a necessity to make choices when it comes to their own performance of the same material. How permissible and desirable it is to deliberately deviate from established versions may differ across cultures and contexts. A combination of these two factors could result in an individual singer's approach varying to different degrees in rhythm, text, melodic inflections and any number of other features.

Although the search for universal traits across folk musics is a less common topic of scholarship these days, it has been speculated that this memory dependence may explain the apparent predominance of features such as conventionalized markers, the coupling of set elements, and repetition (Bohlman 1988: 14-5; Schimmelpenninck 1997: 197) across the orally transmitted creations of different cultures (Burke 1978). In a study of the folk songs of the Wu area in China's south east, for example, Antoinet Schimmelpenninck notes that texts and tunes "are essentially built from 'prefabricated' phrases and motifs" (1997: 197) that combine in a "patchwork" effect (ibid.: 201).

Melodies also display the phenomenon of “seriation,” in which units are strung together in repetitive chains (ibid.: 292). Again, while I am less interested in relating Wuhan’s street performances to ideas of what characteristics may appear across cultures, memorization is a factor, as Keegan-Phipps puts it, in the learning from recordings forming a “logical extension” of oral transmission (2013: 53).

Linked to my remark earlier about these performances displaying mundane rather than self-conscious innovative instincts, it is normal for the singing here to display a high degree of fidelity to recorded versions. I came across, for instance, no performance that changed the lyrics, substantially adapted the melody, or otherwise radically altered a song. There is, of course, some variation in comparison with recorded models, but I seek here to illustrate the limits of this deviation. One performance of the song ‘Boli xin’ (Glass heart) that I recorded in Wuhan is illustrative of the extent to which *melodic* variation typically occurs. In the first verse, the singer A-jing closely replicates the melody of Qi Qin’s 1991 recording. When the same material is repeated during the second verse, she adds a new inflection in one place and bypasses some small elaborations at two other moments. I present this in a comparison between the recording and the street performance in Figure 1:

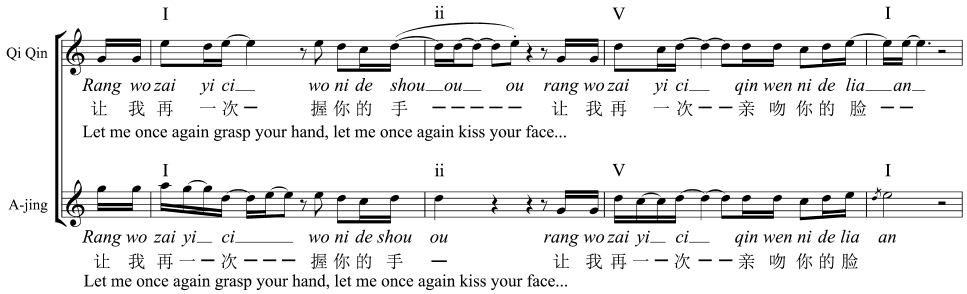

Figure 1: Comparison of excerpts from the melody of ‘Boli xin’ from Qi Qin’s recorded version (above, original key C major), and a performance by A-jing in Wuhan on 15 May 2014 (below, original key F major).

A-jing's main deviation comes in her rendering of the first five syllables of text presented here. She takes a slightly more elaborate route towards the destination point on the note E falling on the syllable *ci.* Later on in the excerpt, the artist on the original recording begins to extend the final syllables of some of the phrases: the vowel sound of the word *shou* ('hand') is rearticulated so that it becomes *shou-ou-ou*, and the word *lian* ('face') becomes *lia-an*. A-jing, on the other hand, minimizes these embellishments; on the recording she is heard breaking off from singing after the word *shou* to speak a few welcoming greetings when she spots one of her benefactors arriving in the audience. As such, it is indication that the music's embeddedness in the social interplay between singers and their audience contacts can result in music being adapted on this fine level of detail, when it is performed in the afterlife context. This example illustrates well what I mean by 'mundane creativity': singers responding directly and spontaneously to the demands of everyday activity rather than actively imposing new meanings meant to comment on headline social issues and identities.

At moments in the music that are more central to the character of a song, street singers seem to take fewer liberties. One such example that I found striking was in the song 'Yi sheng wu hui' (A lifetime without regret), which I heard performed numerous times in Wuhan. At one point in the verse of the original 2012 recording, the vocal line briefly displays an unusual relationship to the underlying metre. In analysing a sample of 57 of the songs I heard performed most often on the streets, I found a characteristic feature of this repertory to be that vocal lines end upon or after the downbeat on which a cadence point is reached. In only seven of these songs are there instances in which the culmination of melodic lines pre-empt the downbeat. Figure 2, however, shows that 'Yi sheng wu hui' is one of the exceptions among this repertory. The first melodic phrase (originally sung by male singer Gao An) ends significantly before the downbeat (the syllable *guang* and the chord of F sharp):

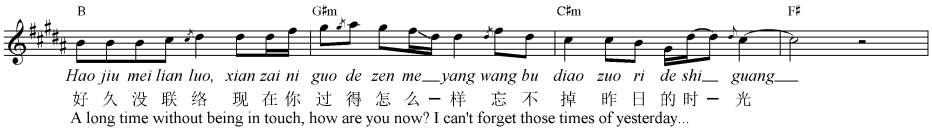

Figure 2: The vocal line of 'Yi sheng wu hui's' first melodic phrase from the recording by Gao An and Hang Jiao.

This is in contrast to the end of the subsequent answering phrase, sung by female singer Hang Jiao (Figure 3), where the final vocal syllable falls exactly on the downbeat (coinciding with the final chord of B, on the syllable *wang*):

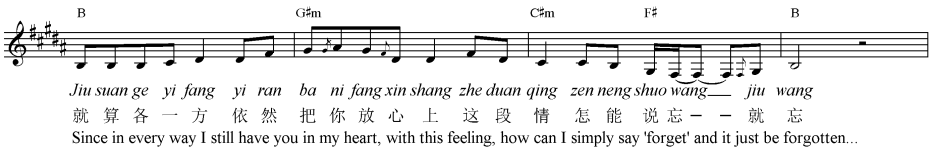

Figure 3: The vocal line of the same song's second phrase.

I found the first phrase aurally striking because of the rarity in this music for vocal lines to come to rest so unambiguously in advance of the accompanying harmony. As might reasonably be expected at such a distinctive moment, however, no singer I heard in Wuhan prolonged the first vocal phrase; each faithfully reproduced the original approach.

In those English pub sessions, Keegan-Phipps doubts that "recordings are the root cause of any norm-formation among musicians" (2013: 46). Later, when I turn to the third mechanism, I suggest that the use of recordings in learning and performance actually promotes mundane creativity in relation to large-scale structural features of songs. At this level of relatively intricate details of the performances in Wuhan, though, there certainly seems to be a fixing effect. Such a phenomenon was encapsulated to me

when the singer and event organizer Di sang ‘Ruguo ni jia gei wo’ (If you gave me your hand), a song from 2007 by Pang Long. At one moment in her performance on 27 October 2014, she seemed to make a mistake, apparently coming in too early with one vocal entry, then having to break off to wait for the recorded backing to catch up. It was only later when I consulted the original recording, however, that I realized this erroneous entry was actually performed intentionally as a joke. What I had heard was Di replicating the original singer ‘accidentally’ coming in early. On the record, the singer exclaims in surprise when the music does not follow him, and there is a burst of canned laughter before the song gets back on track. Had Di chosen to sing this song to live backing, replicating the joke would have been prohibitively complicated to coordinate with the band, and thus in this case the choice of technology impacted directly on her creative possibilities. In this sense, the part of commercial recordings in the performances adds a constraining influence not found, for instance, in Keegan-Phipps’ context of interest.

Taken together, these examples are representative of the scope of performers’ deviations from recordings in Wuhan. In his explorations of oral transmission and contemporary society, Philip Bohlman remarks that “of the various ways of stabilizing change in oral tradition, none is more effective than written tradition” (1988: 28). A recording, however, might also be considered a kind of score; it is one able to provide a wealth of information that the written equivalent could not transmit with nearly as much precision. Recordings can transfer not only the basic elements of a song, but also more detailed nuances. Thus, territories offering potential for variety when a song is passed on orally are fixed more securely when songs are learned by reference to recordings. This mode of transmission goes even further than written tradition in its potential stabilizing effect, encouraging new interpreters to treat a greater range of parameters as established. Furthermore, recordings can be replayed an unlimited number of times, so there is no need for the singer to rely on real-time musical perception or an accurate memory when using them as a learning tool, especially when the same tracks are part of

performances too. This is a point I take forward now into considering the second mechanism through which existing material and local adaptation intersect in meaningful ways here.

The spread of mundane creativity

How are possibilities for mundane creativity shaped by the involvement of recordings in transmission *among* (as well as *to*) Wuhan's street singers? This second mechanism picks up on the idea of oral transmission being a consequence of technological and other circumstances of these people's lives, and it adds 'vertical' dimensions as the songs become part of how they relate to each other in their routine activity. Shows being forced to change locations during my time in Wuhan in 2014 triggered a few singers to switch their attachments from one group to another. Again, highly pragmatic motivations were often at play. When I bumped into one singer who used to perform at the central Jianghan Road location, she told me that her former groups' latest spot was simply too far away from her home and that its new audience was too small, so she had joined another group. Movements of singers like this raise the prospect that mundane creativity in one place could have an influence on other performers around the city. Broadly speaking, on the occasions that individual singers do decide to veer away from what they have heard in recordings, the fixing effect of these texts can operate as a barrier against these innovations spreading to other street singers within stages or between them. While novelties on the street may be fleeting, recordings persist as unchanging texts and are thus likely to overshadow what might be learned from local peers. In a sense, then, learning from recordings constrains the processes of change on two levels.

It is important to note, however, that singers do break free of these constraints when circumstances permit. The song 'Yuanfen redehuo' (Destiny stirring up trouble) was one of the mainstays of the street repertory during my fieldwork, and the interpretation of one particular singer,

Xiao Fang, was infused with an unusual level of emotive expression and with powerful vocal techniques. The chorus of the song features the following lyrics:

Dou shi yuanfen redehuo	都是缘分惹的祸	It is destiny stirring up trouble
Rang wo zhaolemo	让我着了魔	Giving me these demons
Qinghai shenchu	情海深处	In the depths of this emotional sea
Wufa qu jietuo	无法去解脱	There's no way to find relief
[…]	[…]	[…]
Dou shi yuanfen redehuo	都是缘分惹的祸	It is destiny stirring up trouble
Rang wo shou zhemo	让我受折磨	Giving me this torment
Qinghai zhizhong	情海之中	In this sea of emotions
Rang wo qu piaobo	让我去漂泊	Making me drift

('Yuanfen redehuo' by An Dongyang)

Xiao Fang's performance is notable for the particular emphasis she places on the rhyming syllables at the end of these lines (*huo*, *mo*, *tuo*, and so on), in a way contrasting with the understated delivery of An Dongyang's original 2011 recording. She sings the first of these syllables with full force, opening her mouth wide so that the pronunciation of *huo* distorts to sound almost like *hua*. At the same time, she throws back her head and gradually moves the microphone away from her mouth to balance a voice at full power. On the second and third of these rhyming syllables, she employs a subtle decrease in volume combined with a wide vibrato. Not only are these innovations unusually vivid examples of the individual nuance *sometimes* brought by street singers, but this particular performer replicated them with equal energy almost every day for a spell of sessions I witnessed in May 2014. On no other occasion

did I come across an individual singer choosing to perform one song so regularly, and in fact, singers usually do not repeat the same songs very often at all. The repetition here is perhaps also significant because it coincides with the clearest example I observed of performance innovation spreading between singers. Di was the boss of the afternoon session in which Xiao Fang gave these performances and she later took on the role of singer at another show once the authorities public-space clampdown ended the viability of her own stage (Horlor forthcoming). I noticed that Di replicated similar vocal techniques when singing 'Yuanfen redehuo' there. While she seemed unaware of any connection when I asked her about her approach later, I suspect that both her choice of song, and these specific performance features were influenced by Xiao Fang's idiosyncratic and repeated singing of this piece in her presence. Thus, it seems that although the potential for singers to influence each other is limited by a greater reliance upon recorded texts, this process is still possible in suitable circumstances. Song afterlives, then, may have layers enabled by the mobility of singers (albeit within a very small world of similar shows). Again, though, an implication of the extended logic of oral transmission at play here is a generally constraining effect on creativity.

Skills, technologies, and real-time adaptation

Further opportunities and constraints regarding adaptation of material to specific local circumstances are linked to certain skills and technologies available to the singers and bands–these form the third mechanism through which this particular afterlife emerges. Again, this is a facet of the extended logic of oral transmission–one in which everyday technological and social circumstances outweigh ideologies or self-conscious modes of innovation. Unlike for the previous two mechanisms, which generally pointed to the limits of change, here the focus falls on the enabling rather than the constraining of mundane creativity. 'Wo zhi zaihu ni' (I only care for you), a famous song from 1987 by preeminent Chinese pop figure Deng Lijun, is typical of many of those in this repertory in being predicated upon what popular

music analyst Allan Moore refers to as period-structure harmony (2012: 85). This kind of writing is charged with a sense of harmonic purpose and direction, and contrasts with alternatives such as harmony that is based on riffs or repetitive gestures. Indeed, it is the sense of harmonic forward-momentum in Deng's performance of 'Wo zhi zaihu ni' that becomes a site of change–perhaps unintentionally–when the same song is performed on the street. During the chorus in Deng's recording, impetus is produced in three ways. The first is the increase in rate of harmonic change, from one chord per bar in the first half of the chorus (see upper line of chord symbols in Figure 4), to two chords per bar from bar 7, and then a spell during the final two bars in which the chord changes on every beat. The other two ways involve the contrasting of major and minor inflections in bar 7, and the equally unstable chromatic bass progression through bars 9 and 10. When I heard the song performed in Wuhan on 15 May 2014, however, the keyboard player–who was responsible for the harmonic playing–employed a much narrower range of chords. I noted large stretches of the same passage in which the player barely deviated from the tonic (see lower line of chord symbols in Figure 4).

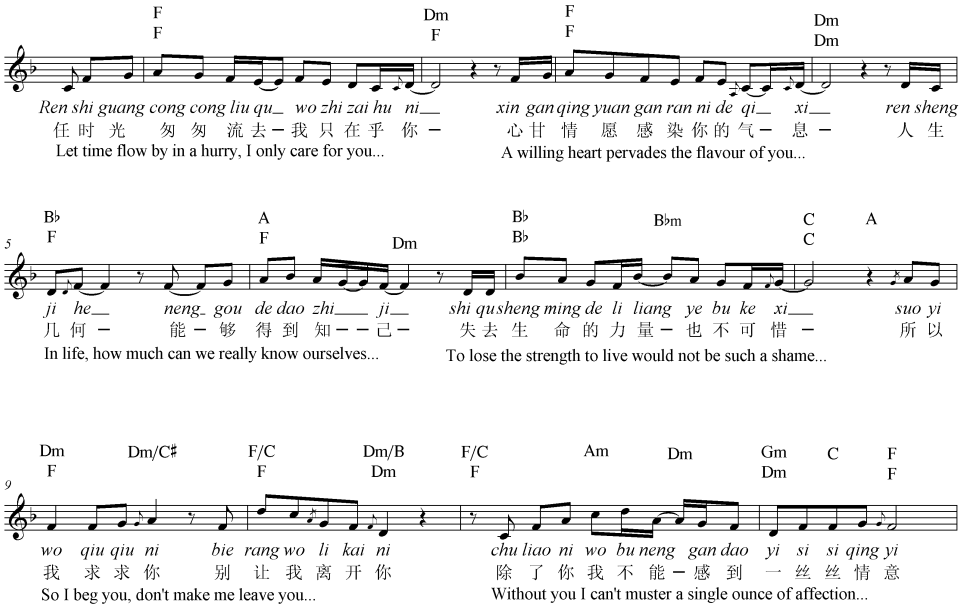

Figure 4: Comparison of the harmony in two versions of 'Wo zhi zaihu ni'. The upper of the two lines of chord symbols reflects the way the melody is harmonized in Deng Lijun's recording, while the lower is from a Wuhan street performance by Zhang Sandong on 15 May 2014.

Comparing the recorded and street versions of this song shows how the effect of harmonizing the same melody differently can be significant. The sense of drive in Deng's version becomes something much more static on the street. I had reason to suspect that this keyboard player's approach to harmony resulted less from a consideration for the musical effect produced than from the constraints of playing skill. While some keyboard players I met in Wuhan were proficient and experienced musicians, a few had been drafted into keyboard duties by necessity and, to a large extent, were learning on the job. One musician that I got to know told me, for instance, that he had taught himself the keyboard and had been playing for 20 years, but he openly acknowledged the limitations in his skills. I noticed that his screen name on the QQ social media platform through which we sometimes communicated was set as 'Looking to learn the piano', and he told me that he was seeking a teacher to impart some "*zhuanye*" ('professional') skills (Gao Lianhui, online chat with author, 13 November 2014). In the case of this evening's performance, a telling sign was that the group's keyboard player replicated the same repeating left-hand bass pattern regardless of the song, and this synchronized far more effectively with the drum patterns of some songs than others. Singers and instrumental musicians alike consistently represented themselves to me as untrained, but this belies their significant skills in several areas of performance. In particular, many of the accompanying bands show a formidable ability to perform vast amounts of repertory with no preparation, and to adapt in real time to various challenges. In other areas, however, the levels of experience and skill are clearly limited. This prosaic level should not be overlooked as part of the mundane creativity on display here.

The area in which I found creative adaptation to real performance situations most striking is song structure. In comparison with melody and the other more immediate features of a song I have just touched upon, a song's detailed formal architecture is perhaps less easily digested through listening to a recording. Whereas varying a melody learned in this way might involve a conscious choice, reproducing every detail of a song's relatively complex temporal construction–the number of times its chorus repeats, where lines recur as refrains, the location of instrumental sections–is not always an easy task, even if it were desirable. I argue that in this area, the learning of songs by recording is not only less likely to produce the fixing effect I have attributed to it so far, but that it also allows more potential for precedents to be consciously overridden in performance, and this often arises from real-time communication with contacts in the audience.

In many cases, the original durations of the recorded songs are in the region of three to four minutes. When performed on the streets, however, they are often significantly longer, even regularly extending to more than twice as long. For songs accompanied by live backing music, the singer and band together decide on the right moment to end the piece. Singers are evidently aware of the responses they receive from the audience, and when this feedback is less positive than expected, they tend to allow the band to finish at a time similar to the recorded versions. Curtailing the embarrassment of receiving very few or no public gifts might be preferable to continuing in the hope of attracting more. More commonly songs are well rewarded, and the singer and keyboard player trade hand signals, questioning glances, or even a few words either on or off microphone, agreeing to repeat certain sections of the song. Quite often they seamlessly go back to the very start and play it over again. Communication of this kind is only really necessary between singer and keyboard player, as other members of the band are simply expected to fall into line. In fact, it seems quite acceptable for them to sometimes play erroneous material until they are able to catch up. That the role of these other band members is subordinate was emphasized to me when I saw that drummers would sometimes even leave

the arena to go to the toilet during a song. In these instances, a resting singer takes over by keeping a most basic form of beat on one drum, and this is evidently not of undue concern to the other musicians. In the repertory favoured on Wuhan's streets, many songs do not feature anything more complex than three basic structural components: verse, chorus, and instrumental interlude. Verses are rarely sung to different words on their second hearing, and instrumental interludes usually replicate the passages played at the very start of songs as introductions. Thus, it is quite straightforward for the band and singer to go on alternating these three sections until the audience is judged to be satisfied or to have yielded all of the gifts likely.

Extending songs is also a feature of those performed not with a live band, but to the accompaniment of recorded backing tracks, both being equally common at these street events in Wuhan. Singers are generally in control of these recordings, which are usually played through their own smart phone or a similar device connected to the PA system. Thus, when a song is coming to an end, or sometimes even much earlier, singers can move over to the equipment and reset the song to the beginning, or perhaps skip to another track. In a few locations where a third party is in charge of the recording, it is not uncommon to hear singers call out requests to go back to the beginning, or indeed, for the assistant in control of the music to do this spontaneously. Just as when there is a live band, the singer pragmatically ends the performance when they perceive the right time to have arrived, and there appears little problem in these circumstances for them simply to stop singing at any point, or to cut off the music abruptly. As a result, a notable feature of performances all around Wuhan is for very little emphasis to be placed on replicating the structural integrity of the original song, or on a sense of progress from its beginning to its end. In addition, some singers perform medleys with transitioning backing tracks prepared in advance. In a continuous flow of similar music lasting up to ten minutes, it is difficult to perceive clearly where one song ends and the next begins. Thus, unlike features such as melody and lyrics, the formal structure of a song is an element to which personalized and spontaneous

interpretations are extensively applied, and in which the singer has a high degree of autonomy to respond to connections with the audience.

Conclusion

Street performances in Wuhan join covers, television talent shows, karaoke singing, and various other practices in giving afterlives to popular songs. They are distinct phases of creativity layered on top of canonized musical products, with new (often subtle) meanings realized as people relate to each other through specific performance occasions. Indeed, in these particular afterlives, relations between material and practice are less obviously linked to self-conscious visions of change; they demand a look at implicit mechanisms for new levels of creative agency manifest in the modest singularities of performances in detached collaboration with musical texts. Recordings are the primary learning materials for musicians; singers show a degree of deviation from this material where the demands of the context take precedence over less musically meaningful features of the recordings, and the afterlife is layered, as these adaptations can spread between singers to a limited extent. In other respects, especially in relation to the formal structure of songs, singers also make real-time adaptations in order to tailor their performances to the relationships they foster with potential benefactors in the audience.

These three mechanisms for understanding the learning of material, the spread of change, and the enabling and constraining influences for creativity are united by reference to an extended logic of oral transmission–the integration of the songs into participants' wider social circumstances, the technological environment of musical encounter and performance, and musicians' backgrounds and training. I see this lens as a tool to bring mundane and prosaic factors into a more central position; self-conscious negotiation of ideology and identity do not tell the full story, especially in the contemporary environment where localized individual actors increasingly have the (home) technology, the (online) platforms, and the inclination to make their creative voices heard. Texts and local renderings

increasingly come together in ways that add to debates on where meaning in music resides, and the idea of popular song afterlives is meant, in particular, to contribute tools for exploring an important but overlooked level of mundane creativity.

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